

Elder. For the Urban Tree Festival.

The tree which defies a child's idea of what a tree is for. Try climbing it and its branches bend and break. Reach out your hand for a leaf to trace and the smell will make you wrinkle your nose in disgust and let it go. You can't stare up into its canopy and be made dizzy by its height. It is a shrub masquerading as its better. It is exiled to the edge of woods, forests, and copses, and lurks in edgelands and hedgerows. 'Our elder' isn't even in our own garden, but in a neglected corner of a neighbour's, a few feet beyond our dilapidated shed. It probably owes its existence to being unremarkable and in an inconvenient place, but it marks our year. In late December, with the help of a cold snap and some drenching westerlies it has just shrugged off the last of this year's leaves, just in time for next year's to emerge. An ever green with a short spell of gold. A companion tree with a human lifespan. A source of buds, flowers, fruit, and insects for a variety of birds. It changes from silhouette to breathtaking green in weeks. It wakes me with the sound of wings descending and closes the day with the sound of settling blackbirds. A haunt of witches which resists all burning. For the herbalists it was a gift of providence, unless too close to the house. For me its closeness is balm.